

“Lot’s Wife” Body Paragraph

Mariah Laugesen

The diction and syntax used in different translations of “Lot’s Wife”, by Anna Akhmatova, affect the tone and meaning of the description of Sodom. In Kunitz and Hayward’s translation, the “restless voice...harrying [Lot’s] woman” (3), reminding her of the life she was leaving behind in her flight, is enclosed in quotes, like so: “It’s not too late, you can still look back / at the red towers of your native Sodom, / the square where you once sang, the spinning-shed, at the empty window set in the tall house / where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed” (4–8). In Wilbur’s translation, by contrast, Lot’s wife hears not a restless voice, but feels a “wild grief in [her] bosom”, crying out, and the words describing it are not quoted, but italicized: *“Look back, it is not too late for a last sight / Of the red towers of your native Sodom, the square / Where once you sang, the gardens you shall mourn, / And the tall house with empty windows where / You loved your husband and your babes were born”* (4–8).

These differences in syntax spring naturally from the ways the third line was translated. The “restless voice” of Kunitz and Hayward’s translation, while referring to her own self-doubt, implies an external force hindering Lot’s wife, an association reinforced by putting the doubts it raised in quotation marks. By contrast, Wilbur’s translation talks not of a voice, an external source of worry, but of a grief coming from within the woman. It is not a thought but an emotion, and the italics make it clearly from within, rather than a voice, a quote, that it heard but not felt. This difference in translation affects how the poem is understood, as both translators mirror their interpretation of the meaning in the syntax.

“When Your Face Came Rising” Body Paragraph

Mariah Laugesen

In translations of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “When Your Face Came Rising” (or “When Suddenly I Saw You Rise”), the diction and syntax affect its tone and meaning. This can be seen when the poet describes how love has changed his life. In Reavey’s translation, the effect of love on the poet is described as “initiating into the colors of the world / uninitiated me” (7–8). In Vagapov’s translation, the same passage is, “[you] let me uninitiated man / into the world of magic colors” (5–8). The diction and syntax vary here in important ways. Reavey’s translation, by repeating “initiate” in both lines, emphasizes that initiation, that process of growth, Vagapov’s translation, by contrast, emphasizes the wonder that was revealed, first showing the poet’s inexperience and then describing the beauty he had been missing. The way this beauty is described reinforces the emphasis as well: “colors of the world” implies broadening horizons, a greater appreciation for and knowledge of the whole world. “Magic colors”, by contrast, does not imply greater scope, merely greater power, and creates a more tightly focused idea of beauty. These differences in translation affect the significance of what the poet loves.

“Fear” Body Paragraph

Mariah Laugesen

The diction in different translations of Gabriela Mistral’s poem “Miedo”, or “Fear”, impact its tone and meaning. The speaker opens by saying she doesn’t want her daughter to become a swallow. In Doris Dana’s translation, the speaker says her daughter would “fly far away into the sky” (3); in Ursula LeGuin’s translation, she says “she’d dive straight up to heaven” (3). Both lines convey her fear of her daughter leaving, flying away, but they have different implications. Dana’s rendering of the line emphasizes the openness of the sky, the great distance the speaker’s daughter could cover; the sky is full of space her daughter would seek out, progressing farther and farther away from home. LeGuin’s choice, by contrast, is more sudden. The girl would dive, a word implying directness and speed—she would throw herself away from her home as immediately as she could. It is a more visceral word, evoking a rush of intentful movement, and while the sky is a broad, terrestrial place, heaven seems further and more inaccessible. While Dana’s translation conjures an expansive world for the daughter to fall into, LeGuin’s translation creates greater urgency—the girl would leave immediately, and the mother would lose her just like that. Dana’s translation evokes more literal distance, but LeGuin’s shows a greater emotional divide.

“The Sleeper in the Valley” Body Paragraph

Mariah Laugesen

In Arthur Rimbaud’s poem “The Sleeper in the Valley”, the imagery used by different translators varies significantly, greatly impacting the meaning and tone. The poem describes a young soldier lying by a river. In A.S. Kline’s translation, one line is rendered as, “Feet in the yellow flags, he sleeps” (9). Ludwig Lewisohn takes a different approach, rendering the line as, “He sleeps amid the iris” (9). What is fascinating about this is that the lines convey very different images, and neither give all the information. Lewisohn’s translation is very literal, not communicating much beyond the information stated. Kline’s translation is more striking, the imagery more dramatic and resonant. Unlike Lewisohn’s translation, we know the flowers are yellow, and “flags” calls to mind military symbols associated with the soldier. However, it does not communicate that the flowers are irises, and only from context can it be derived that they are flowers at all. Lewisohn’s translation is simple and communicative, where Kline’s is unclear but striking.